

College Students Informal and Formal Ways of Seeking Help: Who's to talk with?

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Abstract

Records show various ways to better understand help-seeking behavior. Literatures also showed that despite the fact that free counseling is available in the campus; only limited numbers of students are accessing the said service. The current study investigated the college students' informal and formal ways of seeking help among 488 samples enrolled at a private university in Metro Manila. These college students were 18.5 years old on average [219 or 44.8% are males and 269 or 55.1% are females]. Findings reveal that 57% have not received or sought counseling while 43% were found to be aware of the presence and have received or sought a counseling service. Half or 55% proportions have expressed a need to talk their concerns if offered and 45% expressed no interest of expressing their concerns. The present study revealed that these college students marked preference for informal ways of seeking help specifically to their friends, parents, and other significant others but also showed interest in accessing the formal ways of seeking help. These results highlight the needs to explore better mechanisms as to how the campus-based counseling can maximize students' informal ways of seeking help. Working with students significant others can be explored by creating a peer support system and easy access to counseling. Furthermore, results point the need for the school counselors to further promote the services of the campus school counseling centers by educating the students, parents, and campus stakeholders of the benefits of counseling.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behavior, Filipino College Students, Informal and Formal Ways of Help-Seeking

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Introduction

University campuses and colleges offer an exceptional opportunity to address students' problems and have channels that help promote a positive effect on students' mental health (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010). However, despite the free counseling services available for students, only a few percentages use the said service (Vogel, Wester & Larson, 2007). For instance, Atik & Yalçın (2011) posited that when students in a university are faced with various challenges that require psychological help, an attitude toward seeking help is a salient factor that affects their decision. This decision is either to seek or not to seek psychological assistance. Students are reluctant to seek help from formal sources like school counselors and psychologists on the campus (Boldero & Fallon, 1995).

Research suggests that several factors are associated with one's decision to seek help. Gender differences have found to be associated with help-seeking intentions among females in some studies (Komiya, Good & Sherrod, 2000; Yu, Liu, Hu, Liu, Yan, Zhou & Xiao, 2015; Amarasuriya, Jorm & Reavley, 2018), perceptions of public stigma contributed to the experience of self-stigma influenced help-seeking attitudes and help-seeking willingness (Vogel, Wade & Hackler, 2007), and certain personality characteristics such as willingness or unwillingness to seek help were also identified (Bouchard, 2003).

Acceptance of help-seeking procedures is a vital connection between the onset of mental health problems and the services that can be given by health care professionals (Al-Krenawi, Graham, Dean, & Eltaiba, 2004). Having a deeper understanding of students' help-seeking behavior is important to be able to address and cater to the needs of students. Counseling services help prevent the onset of psychological disorders by helping students deal with their stressful life events and treating some possible pre-existing psychological concerns (Eisenberg, Hunt & Speer, 2013).

The Informal and Formal Ways of Help-seeking

According to Rickwood, Dean, Wilson & Ciarrochi (2005), there is a differentiation in sources of help according to the different stages of the lifecycle. Help-seeking is defined as a behavior of seeking help, communicating with other people to get help in any form such as advice, understanding, information, treatment, and or general support in response to a problem. It is also defined as receiving support from informal (e.g. family, friends, community) and formal sources of support (e.g. mental health professionals) to solve emotional and behavioral problems (Rickwood, Dean, Wilson & Ciarrochi, 2005). Young ones are more likely to seek help from informal resources rather than formal resources. Seeking help from friends tends to be the preferred source for their personal and emotional problems while parents ranked second to friends (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Schonert-Reichl & Muller, 1996). Although there are a lot of studies that examined positive psychological factors that could facilitate the help-seeking process, little research has examined informal sources of help-seeking (Rickwood & Thomas, 2012).

Help-seeking and the Theory of Planned Behavior

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1980) explored multiple variables affecting the help-seeking behavior of an individual (Ajzen, 2011). It premised that a more positive attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control increase an individual's behavioral intention that also increases the likelihood of engaging or executing certain behavior such as seeking help. Human action is guided by three kinds of considerations: beliefs about the likely outcomes, beliefs about the normative expectations of others, the motivation to comply with these expectations, the beliefs about the presence of factors that may facilitate or impede the performance of the behavior, and the perceived power of these factors (Ajzen, 2002).

The TPB hypothesized the prediction of mental health services requires knowledge of individual general assessment of help-seeking services and their information of their subjective norm and perceived behavioral control seeking help (Mackenzie, Knox, Gekoski & Macaulay, 2004). For instance, Mak & Davis (2014) tested the application of the theory of planned behavior in explaining the intention to seek mental health services and understand factors related to intention to seek mental health services. The model suggested that attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control were all significant predictors of help-seeking intention although symptom severity, prior help-seeking, and gender did not significantly directly predict help-seeking intention. Hess and Tracey (2013) tested the TPB model specifically for three common problem areas of students such as anxiety or depression, career choice concerns, and alcohol or drug use. They found out that it was significant variables that were executed of a person when considering whether to seek or not to seek psychological help.

The Present Study

Campus policies and mental health prevention programs are important means of increasing students' personal positive beliefs towards mental health treatment (Chen, Romero, & Karver, 2016). Counseling services are beneficial for the students on campus. It caters to students' concerns like academic, personal difficulties, student success, adjustment, and mental health concerns. Counseling on the campus is free and easy access for the students (Lee, Olson, Locke, Michelson, & Odes, 2009). However, despite the fact the free counseling is available inside the campus only a few have utilized the counseling services.

It is in this light that the researcher would like to explore college students' informal and formal ways of help-seeking to be able to have a better understanding of their internal and external resources in helping themselves cope. Understanding students' help-seeking preferences will be able to help school counselors in developing creative ways in promoting counseling programs and services.

Findings

A total of 488 participants' responses were collected, tabulated, and analyzed. As shown in Table 1, the result of this group revealed that more than half (n= 277 or 57%) of the respondents have not received or sought a counseling service but also show a good number for those who have received or sought counseling (n=211 or 43%). Proper information and awareness campaigns of the counseling center

programs and services can lead the students to avail of the services. Still, the result shows that many students are aware of the counseling service and have sought a formal way of seeking help.

	Frequency	Percentage
Have received/sought counseling	211	43%
Have not received/sought counseling	277	57 %
Total	488	100%

Table 1: Tabulation of participants who have received/sought and have not received/sought counseling

Table 2, indicates the participants' responses when asked if they would like to talk about their concerns if the opportunity is offered. Most of the responses show that if the opportunity is offered, the majority (n= 268 or 55%) will likely talk or discuss their concerns and less than half will opt not to talk or discuss their concerns (n= 220 or 45%).

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	268	55%
No	220	45%
Total	488	100%

Table 2: Tabulation of participants when ask if they would like to talk their concerns if opportunity is offered

Moreover, Table 3 shows the participants' preferences in seeking help. There were seven identified informal ways of seeking help and two formal ways of seeking help. Results shows that most of the students preferred to seek help from their friends (Rank 1, n=208 or 42.6%) followed by their parents (Rank 2, n=132 or 27.0%), school counselors (Rank 3, n= 118 or 26.3%), boy/girlfriend (Rank 4, n=99 or 20.2%), psychiatrist/other mental health professionals (Rank 5, n= 86 or 17.6%), priest/pastor/religious (Rank 6, n= 61 or 12.5%), siblings (Rank 7, n= 58 or 11.8%), no one (Rank 8, n =47 or 9.6%), teachers (Rank 9, n= 44 or 9.0%) and relatives (Rank 10, n= 43 or 8.8%).

Results indicate that friends, parents, and school counselors were the top 3 resources of students. It shows that for this group, they accessed both informal and formal ways of seeking help. Studies show that there was a significantly higher preference for seeking help from friends and family members rather from professional counselors and or psychotherapists (Bunagan, Tuliao, & Velasquez, 2011). However, it is interesting to note that participants from this study sought help from school counselors. It seems that students for this group are aware of the benefits that they can get from a professional. Supported by the Theory of Planned Behavior, individuals who have the belief that they have accessed and can get proper help from the counseling center are likely to intend to seek help and talk their concerns to school counselors. Campaigns of the counseling centers can help facilitate students' own volition of seeking help and making them aware of the benefits that they can get from the counseling service.

	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Informal Ways of Seeking Help			
Parents	132	27.0%	2 nd
Friends	208	42.6%	1 st
Boyfriend/Girlfriend	99	20.2%	4 th
Teachers	44	9.0%	9 th
Siblings	58	11.8%	7 th
Priest/Pastor/Religious	61	12.5%	6 th
Relatives	43	8.8%	10 th
No One	47	9.6%	8 th
Formal Ways of Seeking Help			
School Counselor	118	26.3%	3 rd
Psychiatrist/Other Mental Health Professionals	86	17.6%	5 th

Table 3: Tabulation of participants Informal and Formal Ways of Seeking-Help

Conclusion

The findings of this study have contributed to college students' preferences in seeking help. It shows that generally college students sought help from their significant others specifically towards their friends but accessed a wide range of both formal and informal ways of seeking help. It highlights that for this group, participants show an interest in seeking help if the opportunity is being offered. This information is very helpful in the delivery of programs and services of every counseling center. Educating students can enhance the help-seeking acceptance and therefore can enhance their own volition of seeking help.

More quantitative and qualitative with a larger population size could be done to further explore and understand students' help-seeking behavior. It is also important to acknowledge that students generally talk and discuss first their concerns to significant others. It is interesting to note that perhaps school counselors can think of programs that could highlight the value of the support system and the referral. Cultural factors can also be explored to see other patterns and uniqueness of help-seeking behavior among students.

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